

Black History Month 2014

*Remarks by Senator Robert Menendez, as Prepared for Delivery
Newark, New Jersey – February 9, 2014*

As we celebrate today here at New Hope Baptist Church, we remember the 50th Anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act – a moment in time that changed the lives for millions of Americans and the story of a nation.

We remember the words of John Kennedy who took those first steps toward making the Civic Rights Act a reality before he was gunned-down in Dallas and the banner was taken-up by Lyndon Johnson.

Kennedy said, in those immortal words: *“The nation was founded by men [and women] of many nations and backgrounds... It was founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened.”*

We turned a corner, but the road has been long and fraught with many obstacles. Eleven million men and women – African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans – live in the shadows, hoping against hope to find a pathway to citizenship and we gave them that pathway in the Senate when we voted for Comprehensive Immigration Reform.

The fact is we have not ended injustice. We have not ended intolerance. We have not guaranteed equal rights and justice for all. But we are making progress to ensure that no one in America is a second-class citizen, that Civil Rights are the law of the land, and Immigration Reform is the Civil Rights issue of our time.

Today we come together to celebrate Black History Month, and to remember the struggle for freedom, equal rights, and justice that continues today.

It is my great privilege to welcome you to the Fourth Annual “Standing on the Shoulders of Giants” Black History Month Program. This year, we remember the sacrifices of African-Americans who marched for freedom, and the battle in Congress 50 years ago to pass the Civil Rights Act.

Today, we celebrate the proud accomplishments of those who came before us, those in the vanguard of the Civil Rights Movement – the beacons of hope who continue to guide us. This year, our theme of “*Standing on the Shoulders of Giants*” is a keen reminder of our history – the story of America – written large in the blood, sweat, and tears of a generation of Americans, descended from slaves and yearning to contribute to progress of this nation.

They are the ones who sacrificed. They are the ones who have us hope. They are the one who lifted us up. They are the giants, and we celebrate their legacy today.

It was the 12th Century theologian John of Salisbury who first spoke of the giants among us. He wrote *"...we are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more not because our sight is superior or because we are taller than they, but because they raise us up, and by their great stature add to ours."*

It is in that spirit that we come together this year to honor the Association of Black Women Lawyers, the Garden State Bar Association, Sherryl Gordon, Executive Director, Council 1 of AFSCME, the Honorable Gerald W. Owens, Vice President of the Essex West Hudson Council of the AFL-CIO's and International Organizer for the Longshoremen's Association.

They are our giants this year. Let's give them a big round of applause!

We are grateful to them for all they have done to make New Jersey a better place to live, work, and raise a family. I would also like to thank Reverend Joe Carter and the New Hope Baptist Church Family for their gracious hospitality and support in hosting this year's event. And I would like to thank my good friend, Dr. Joyce A. Harley, today's Mistress of Ceremonies. Thank you Joyce for leading the way today...

And of course, our very special keynote speaker this year, is someone who has set a standard of excellence and dedication in public service, and is responsible for making sure this nation is safe and secure.

Join me in welcoming Secretary of Homeland Security, Jeh Johnson. Thank you, Mr. Secretary, for agreeing to participate and for helping to make this year's event a great success.

This year as we come together to celebrate Black History Month, let's reflect on the fundamental concept of community and public service, both of which, too often, seems to be in short supply these days.

Dr. King said, *"Everyone can be great because everyone can serve."* His words have been echoed many times before by those who have come to represent all-that-is-good and all-that-is-great in the human heart and the human spirit.

The poet, Maya Angelou said, *"I have found that among its benefits, 'giving' liberates the soul of the giver."*

Teddy Roosevelt, once said: *"This country will not be a good place for any of us to live in unless we make it a good place for all of us to live in."*

Scientists like Albert Einstein and Albert Schweitzer believed in the power of service to heal our souls. Einstein said: *"Only a life lived for others, is a life worthwhile..."*

And Albert Schweitzer was speaking to all of us when he said: *"I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know; the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."*

The Bible speaks of community and it speaks of our responsibilities to each other. In Isaiah it is written: *"...and if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday sun... And the Lord will guide you and satisfy your desire and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail."*

Matthew writes: *"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me in."*

These sentiments are the heart and the soul of our civilization, they are the ideals of those who worship a benevolent God, they are the inspiration of those who seek to make this world a better place and together they were the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement that led to the Civil Rights Act 50 years ago.

They are about all of us coming together in unity and harmony, each of us working for the betterment of all of us.

We say it when Sandy struck and when we talk about Sandy, I would like to take a moment to recognize the tremendous efforts of Rev. Carter, Alycia Green and the New Hope Baptist Family for all the work they did in helping families in Newark, Essex County and across the State in the aftermath of the storm.

I cannot help but look back at how we came together after Sandy – better, stronger, more unified than ever before. And I cannot help but reflect on those political debates in the Congress of the United States and those who stood against helping us as we fought for recovery, and the contrast of their remarks to Isaiah and Matthew and Martin Luther King.

I cannot help but reflect on the lack of community spirit in those in Congress who have stood against unemployment insurance in the face of joblessness, against food stamps for those who are hungry, against helping those in need and reaching out to those in trouble. And yet they claim to believe in the teachings of the Bible they wave with one hand, and the values enumerated in our Constitution they wave with the other – and yet they fail – they utterly fail – to act on those values. They fail to open their hearts to those who have played by the rules and need a helping hand.

Martin Luther King said, *"An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."*

He said, *"Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness."*

But he was not naïve. He knew and understood that many Americans believed Black America was not part of the broader American community. He understood the depth and danger of the struggle for equal rights and justice in which he was engaged – and for which he gave his life on a balcony in Memphis. He was a man of deep and abiding faith who knew history and fully understood the power of the forces aligned against him.

He once said: *“It is still one of the tragedies of human history that ‘the children of darkness’ are frequently more determined and zealous than the ‘children of light.’”*

But he believed deeply in the concept of community and knew that opening our hearts to others will free our souls and lead us to a more just and tolerant world.

As we come together to celebrate Black History Month, let us also celebrate our commitment to service and those who act on their faith – those who carry the spirit of community in their hearts. It is how we should all live, and it certainly is how we should govern.

When Sandy struck, when people lost their lives and their property, all New Jerseyans stood together united by our determination to build it again, build it better stronger than before. We learned, in the aftermath of Sandy, that opening our hearts to each other can truly free our souls.

That was what my mother taught me growing up in a tenement in Union City and it is the lesson I have brought with me in all that I have done in my public service career.

If we really care about people, if we really care about community, we need to act like it. We need to extend federal unemployment benefits – once and for all – for the 90,000 New Jerseyans and 1.3 million Americans who need it, who played by the rules and need time to find a job.

Unemployment benefits not only provide a life raft for families, they also have a strong positive impact on our economy, producing approximately \$1.60 in GDP for every dollar of benefits. That’s because the unemployed families receiving these benefits spends the money, rather than saving it.

And if we really want to do what’s right for the community-as-a-whole we need to undertake comprehensive tax reform. We need to simplify the tax code to make it more competitive and transparent for families and businesses. As a member of the Finance committee, I’m looking forward to the playing a leading role in this debate...

And, as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, last month we held a hearing on the growing crisis in South Sudan. We cheered and supported South Sudan’s independence in 2011. After decades of war with the Sudanese government, the people of South Sudan voted in favor of self-determination and the chance to create an inclusive, democratic, prosperous society. Now, that ideal is in jeopardy.

I have always been inspired by the work of Dr. Ralph Bunche. When Dr. Bunche accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950 for his mediation of a ceasefire in the Middle East, he said: *“The United Nations has no vested interests in the status quo. It seeks a more secure world, a better, world, a world of progress for all peoples. In the dynamic world society which is the objective of the United Nations, all people must have equality and equal rights.”*

Over 1000 people have been killed in South Sudan. More than 194,000 have been displaced and humanitarian conditions will surely deteriorate as access to conflict-areas diminishes. I think we can all agree that it is absolutely necessary that to avoid a downward spiral into further ethnic violence and chaos all armed elements must cease hostilities in South Sudan immediately.

By standing on the shoulders of giants such as Dr. Bunche, the United States, the United Nations and the international community should work to support the recently announced cease fire between South Sudan and opposition forces.

Finally, if we care about community values and we need to invest in our most valuable resource: our human capital. I have always supported doing all we can to close the skills gap by partnering businesses and community colleges so young people will have a chance to be part of the 21st century economy.

In the legislation I introduced, workers would receive training and career assistance while businesses would have access to the skilled workers they need to expand and operate their business.

These are just a few of the issues I will continue to work on this year, along with serving as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and keeping New Jersey competitive in the global economy, and making sure New Jersey's industries benefit from our foreign trade efforts in Asia and Latin America.

New Jersey stands to benefit from our trade negotiations around the world, and I will be at the forefront of those efforts to help create jobs here at home. While the job market has made significant improvements since the depth of the recession, we still have far too many people out of work.

We need to do everything we can to continue to create jobs and restore the middle class. That's why I have always fought those who do not put any value in the concept of community, those who seem to believe that we are not in this together, but that each of us is on our own, no matter how deep the need or devastating the circumstance that acting together in the interest of any one of us is somehow a betrayal of all of us.

But, at the end of the day, the opposite is true, that when each of us works together for the benefit of all of us, we are being true to our values and true to our ideals.

Again, thank you for being here today to help us celebrate.

To this year's honorees: Congratulations you have taken up the banner and lived up to the ideal of the long struggle for equal rights, justice, tolerance, and freedom that informed the life of leaders like Dr. King.

Perhaps he left us with what might be the fundamental challenge for our time as we struggle to rediscover the spirit of community he fought for and that unites all of us when he said: *"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others..."*

...In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, he will lift some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and more noble life."

As we celebrate Black History Month 2014, let that be our challenge – each of us working to lift all of us -- mindful only of *"the content of our character."* And let that be what leads us to being not only New Jersey strong, but America strong.

Thank you all very much for being part of our annual Black History Month celebration.

###